DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 350 887 FL 800 558

AUTHOR	Taylor, Marcia
TITLE	The Language Experience Approach and Adult Learners. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education for Limited-English-Proficient Adults, Washington, DC.; National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-LE-92-01
PUB DATE	Jun 92
CONTRACT	RI89166001
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Students; *English (Second Language); *Language Experience Approach; *Literacy; Oral Language; Second Language Instruction; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This Digest focuses on using the language experience approach for teaching adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners. The language experience approach (LEA) ia a whole language approach that promotes reading and writing through the use of personal experiences and oral language. It can be used in tutorial or classroom settings with homogeneous or heterogenous groups of learners. Specific sections of the digest look at the following: (1) features of the language experience approach; (2) LEA with ESL learners; and (3) two variations of LEA (personal experience and group experience). It is conclude that although the LEA was developed primarily as a tool for reading development, this technique can be used successfully to develop listening, speaking, and writing as well. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (VWL)

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ERIC Digest

National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

The language Experience Approach and Adult Learners

By: Marcia Taylor, Joblink 2000

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ERIC Digest

June 1992
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The Language Experience Approach and Adult Learners

by Marcia Taylor, JobLink 2000

The language experience approach (LEA) is a whole language approach that promotes reading and writing through the use of personal experiences and oral language. It can be used in tutorial or classroom settings with homogeneous or heterogeneous groups of learners. Beginning literacy learners relate their experiences to a teacher or aide, who transcribes them. These transcriptions are then used as the basis for other reading and writing activities.

Although the LEA was first developed for native-English-speaking children (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Spache & Spache, 1964; Stauffer, 1965), it has also been used successfully with English as a Second Language (ESL) students of all ages. Adult learners entering ESL programs may or may not have previous educational or literacy experiences; nonetheless, all come to class with a wealth of life experiences. This valuable resource for language and literacy development can be tapped by using the LEA. The approach develops literacy not only with the whole learner in mind, but also the whole language.

Features of the Language Experience Approach

The LEA is as diverse in practice as its practitioners. Nonetheless, some characteristics remain consistent (Hall, 1970):

- Materials are learner-generated.
- All communication skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—are integrated.
- Difficulty of vocabulary and grammar are determined by the learner's own language use.
- Learning and teaching are personalized, communicative, creative.

LEA With ESL Learners

Krashen and Terrell (1983) recommend two criteria for determining whether reading materials are appropriate for ESL learners: The reading must be 1) at a comprehensible level of complexity and 2) interesting to the reader. Reading texts originating from learners' experiences meet these two criteria because 1) the degree of complexity is determined by the learner's own language, and 2) the texts relate to the learner's personal interests.

Both criteria are of particular importance in adult beginning ESL classes, where the paucity of reading materials can be problematic. Many books written in simplified English are either too juvenile or too uninteresting to be considered appropriate reading material for adults.

Two Variations of LEA

The personal experience

The most basic, and in fact the original, form of the LEA is the simple transcription of an individual learner's personal experience. The teacher or aide (or in a mixed-ability class, a more proficient learner) sits with the learner so that the learner can see what is being written. The session begins with a conversation, which might be prompted by a picture, a topic the learner is interested in, a reading text, or an event the learner has participated in. Once a topic evolves, the learner gives an oral account of a personal experience related to that topic. The transcriber may help the learner expand or focus the account by asking questions.

In most forms of the LEA, the experience is transcribed as the learner dictates it, without transcriber corrections to grammar or vocabulary. This technique keeps the focus on the content rather than the form of what is written and provides concrete evidence of the learner's language growth over time (Heald-Taylor, 1989). Errors can be corrected later, during revising and editing stages of the writing process. The relationship between the transcriber and learner should be well established before attempting the LEA, and the transcriber should be supportive of what the learner has to say.

The group experience

Groups may also develop language experience stories together. An experience can be set up and carried out by the group, or stories can grow out of experiences and stimuli from any part of the learners' personal, work, or classroom lives. The following steps are often involved:

1. *Choosing the experience or stimulus.* In collaboration with the learners, choose a prompt or activity that can be discussed and written up in some form. This might include pictures, movies, videotapes, songs, books or articles, class projects, field trips, holidays or celebrations, or an activity designed for this purpose.

2. *Organizing the activity.* Develop a plan of action with the class. This might include what you will do and when, and what you will need. The plans can be written on the board to provide the first link between the activity itself and the written word.

3. *Conducting the experience.* The following activities might be done in the classroom or in the community.

In the classroom	In the community
Preparing food (sandwich, French toast, salad, popcorn)	Taking fieldtrips (to the bank, market, malls, library, city hall)
Making cards (thank you notes, get well cards, holiday cards)	Mapping the school or the neighborhood
Class projects (simulations, bulletin boards, skits)	

If the experience takes place within the classroom, the teacher can narrate it as it unfolds, repeating key words and phrases.

For more advanced learners, discussions, as well as actual experiences, can evolve into group-produced texts. Discussion topics might include work, adult education, adjustment to life in the U.S., or current local and world events. Again, the teacher might write key words and phrases on the board as they are mentioned in the discussion.

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4. *Discussing the experience*, including all learners in the discussion and writing key words and phrases on the board. The class might, for example, reconstruct the sequence of events that took place. Some learners may be capable of describing an entire experience or generating an extended text about a prompt, while others may only be able to answer questions about it. The teacher may need to stimulate or focus the discussion by asking *wh*-questions—Who was involved? When did this take place? What did we do first? Regardless of the level of active participation of various learners, it is crucial that all *understand* the discussion.

5. *Developing a written account.* The class works together to develop a written account of what was done or discussed. Before actually writing a text, the class might do some planning activities like brainstorming, webbing or mapping, listing, or sequencing ideas. Learners may dictate a description or sequence of events in an activity while the teacher or aide writes it down, or a group of students may work together in groups to produce an account. Regardless of who does the writing, it should be easily visible to all learners—on the board, on a flip chart pad, or on an overhead transparency.

The teacher does not correct the learners' language at this point, although learners may correct themselves or each other as they work together. Formal correction can be done later, as part of the revising and editing stages.

With beginning students, written compositions may be very simple, just a sentence or two if this represents their level of English proficiency. Length is not significant.

6. *Reading the account.* Once the written text is complete, the teacher or a learner can read it aloud to the class, focusing on key words and phrases, and then learners can read it silently on their own. Of course, oral reading of the account does not need to occur *only* at this stage, but can be done at many different points during its production, thus promoting rethinking and revision throughout its evolution.

7. *Extending the experience.* Many language and literacy activities beyond rereading can be based on the written text. The following possibilities can be selected and adapted according to learners' proficiency levels.

With beginning learners, teachers can

- have students copy the story themselves;
- have students match words with pictures or definitions;
- delete every *n*th word (4th, 5th, 6th, etc.) to create a cloze exercise. Have the students fill in the blanks either with or without the assistance of a word bank, depending on their literacy level;
- select words from the story for vocabulary, spelling, or sound-symbol correspondence activities;
- use the texts to review a grammar point, such as sequence of tenses, word order, or pronoun referents;
- dictate the story for learners to write;
- write the sentences in scrambled order and have students rewrite them, restoring the correct sequence;
- scramble key words and have students unscramble them.

More advanced learners can

- use the group-produced text as the basis for individually written texts about the same topic, about a similar experience, or as a critique of this experience. Then they might read each others' texts;
- revise and edit the texts and prepare them for publication;
- read other texts related to the topic;
- generate comprehension questions for classmates to answer;
- write other types of texts—songs, poems, letters (for example, a letter to the editor), or directions for how to do something.

In a class with learners at different proficiency levels, the teacher can use the more basic activities with the learners at lower levels while the more proficient learners work on the more advanced activities individually or in groups, with less teacher help.

Conclusion

Although the LEA was developed primarily as a tool for reading development, this technique can be used successfully to develop listening, speaking, and writing as well. This integrated approach is unique in that it begins with students' individual or shared experiences as a basis for discussion, writing, and finally reading. As students see their personal experiences transcribed into the written word, they also gain a greater understanding of the *processes* of writing and reading and can make the bridge to reading and writing independently.

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Special thanks to Susan Huss and Peggy Seufert-Bosco

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